

Emerging Transcultural Education in Japan¹

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Introduction

Multicultural Japan — It's not merely an oxymoron or a term used only by academics opposing the longstanding myth of racial, ethnic and cultural homogeneity asserted by politicians, the media and *nihonjinron* literature. In this paper, I illustrate significant changes in Japanese education and society, indicating a gradual shift to *transculturalism*. However, before describing the emergence of *transcultural* education in Japan through a reflexive ethnography chronicling two decades of noteworthy experiences, I analyze the broader concept of multiculturalism within the contested cultural context of Japan, juxtaposed with Canada.

Since 1990, the Japanese government has cautiously accepted immigration as an official policy, in light of the ageing society and significant labour shortages. Subsequently, *kyousei shakai* (a symbiotic society in which people live together harmoniously) has become the catchphrase rhetoric to deal with increasing diversity. But *kyousei shakai* doesn't adequately describe the current reality. Perhaps it's more appropriate to use *transcultural* Japan. I draw on Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu's (2008) seminal work for clarification:

While we will continue to use the words multicultural and multiculturalism as they describe the realities of present-day Japan, we also choose at the same time to use the words *transcultural* and *transculturalism* and they describe even more explicitly what is happening, indicating movement across time, space, and other cultural boundaries. When we realize that multiculturalism is not simply the old concept of culture multiplied by the number of ethnic groups, but a new and internally plural "praxis of culture" within oneself and others, in other words transculturalism, then we begin to make progress toward understanding the deeper workings of Japanese and other societies (Banks, 2006, 2004). (p.9)

Reflexive ethnographic approaches show great promise to better understanding

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education within a given sociocultural context. Nevertheless, even a reflexive ethnographer's text is by nature a partial one and so it is important to realize that what follows is based on one researcher's experience. Caution must be advised in making generalizations of things "Japanese" or "Canadian." Furthermore, researchers must beware of false dichotomies. My account of the 'Japanese' multiculturalism is in no way absolute but is inevitably partial. Had I been a Chinese researcher for instance, I probably would have gained a different understanding and description of 'Japanese' ways of doing things. What might be described as 'uniquely Japanese' is often defined in terms of its difference from what one is accustomed to—in my case, the 'Canadian' ways of doing things. This perspective is central to the notion of 'reflexivity' and comparative ethnographic narrative (see Howe, 2010).

Japan is on the verge of a paradigm shift toward *multiculturalism* as an official policy. Nevertheless, the multiculturalism promoted will be superficial at first. And that is precisely where the society is at now. There are signs of a gradual shift towards international and multicultural policies. I have witnessed changes in the attitudes of students and teachers over the past two decades. In particular, my own family has been a significant part of many examples detailed here. My family offers a micro-ethnographic window into the macro-phenomena of cultural hybridity within Japanese society. Thus, ethnographic narratives of my experiences as, a student, teacher, parent and researcher are the focus of this paper.

Towards a Canadian Transcultural Identity

In light of similarities in perceptions of ethnicity and considerations of modern history, Germany might be a more suitable country to foreshadow the multicultural future of Japan. However, I will draw on my Canadian experience for comparison (see also Howe, 2003). Canada is often hailed as one of the most successful pluralistic, multicultural countries—something for other nations to emulate (Reimann, 2009). Canada has been described as a cultural mosaic, but it is a young country built on immigration and it is very much a work in progress.

In the 1970s, growing up in Victoria, BC, in a middle-class, predominantly white

neighbourhood, I experienced first-hand the growing pains of a nation in transition and in search of a multicultural identity. When I learned about other cultures, they were rarefied, foreign, exotic and distant. Even our study of West Coast Indians seemed far removed from the everyday—as if it were an ancient civilization. While we studied First Nations traditions, we didn’t critically question the assimilation policies of the government nor did we learn about the Indian residential schools and systematic stripping of culture.

There was only one child of a visible ethnic minority in my grade five class. He was the only son of the Chinese man who ran the local corner-store. We were both on the school chess team, so I knew him well, with a certain amount of respect and animosity, as he often beat me! He was a smart and friendly boy but he struggled with English. In any case, most of my peers (myself included) exhibited blatant racist attitudes towards him. My grade seven teacher admonished me for using the derogative label “Chink” in my creative writing. Until then, I didn’t know it was a racial slur. These days, I wonder if my own son feels something like what this Chinese-Canadian boy must have felt. As the only foreign-born child in his class, my son has been described by teachers as “unique” or as a “genius” by classmates for his bilingualism but that doesn’t necessarily reflect his feelings of difference or fragile emerging identity.

In the mid-1990s, as a novice high school teacher, I witnessed the ramifications of official multicultural policies. Racial violence flared at a Surrey, BC inner city school, where I worked, as the once white community struggled with an increasing Indo-Canadian presence. In less than a decade, places like Surrey and other urban communities changed radically with increasing immigration from India, China and other Asian countries. Multiculturalism by way of international food fairs and exchanges with sister cities soon had to take a backseat to more meaningful anti-racist and conflict resolution education.

Fumbling Towards a Transcultural Japan

I often wonder if Japan is about 30 years behind Canada in terms of various social issues. For instance, Japan seems to be following Canada’s example by enacting laws that are now taken for granted in Canadian society. What follows is a partial list:

1. Smoking in public (It is now completely banned in Canada and increasingly not

allowed in various places like train stations in Japan).

2. **Traffic safety** (The use of seatbelts is strictly enforced in Canada but passengers in the back seat don't have to wear seatbelts in Japan. Children in Japan now wear bike helmets when just a few years ago we had to import helmets from Canada for our kids).
3. **Handicapped access** (Increasingly train stations are being retro-fitted with elevators and ramps to allow barrier-free access).
4. **Gender equity** (In the 1990s there used to be gender/age specific classified ad categories like 'Female-under 25' in the Japan Times but these are relics of the past).
5. **The treatment of minority groups** (People used to stare at me, point and say *gaijin* but now foreigners are commonplace in Tokyo. Moreover, foreigners are increasingly more vocal in their opposition to policies like fingerprinting and immigration control measures).

In September 1990, when I first arrived in Japan, there were no bilingual train announcements and few bilingual signs. Now, bilingual announcements are ubiquitous and multilingual signs are commonplace in train stations and on major roadways. There are signs with four languages (Japanese, English, Chinese, Korean) in the newly renovated Utsunomiya station. My first experience in Japan included working as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) at a number of Tokyo junior high schools. In many cases, I was the only foreigner these children had ever seen or talked to in person. In a sense, I was a celebrity. Two decades ago, foreigners were a novelty, even in urban environments like Tokyo. In the countryside, foreigners were virtually invisible. Since 1990, with the advent of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program and the widespread use of native ALTs in classrooms; exchange programs between Japanese schools and schools abroad; and increased immigration, foreigners are a much greater visible part of the school system.

ALTs from USA, UK, Canada, Australia and elsewhere work at local schools throughout Japan. Moreover, in my children's classes in Saitama, there are several boys and girls with mixed ethnicity. One or more of their parents speak Korean, Chinese, English or Tagalog. The Saitama community sponsors an annual international friendship fair, attended by hundreds of people of many nationalities. In 2009, the PTA of our elementary school formed a new committee to foster international understanding through displays of various countries' cultures at the annual Welcome Fair. Transcultural thinking can also be seen

through sports. During World Cup 2006, international school lunches reflected the ethnic foods of different soccer teams. Our local J-League soccer team, Omiya Ardija has several popular players from South America, living amongst us. So, one doesn't need to attend the local international preschool (as many children in our neighbourhood do) or commute to an international school in Tokyo to meet foreigners or to experience multiculturalism. Thus, there are many pockets of transcultural education both within formal and non-formal educational settings. In a sense, my children act as junior ambassadors for Canada and Japan. For example, my son made a presentation to his grade four class about his transcultural experiences within Canada and Japan entitled, "Saitama and the World". In turn, he taught about Japan to his grade seven class in Canada. In addition, my daughter taught origami to her Canadian grade two classmates, during our visit last September.

Formal Transcultural Education

While there are virtually no multicultural education programs to deal with increasing diversity in Japanese public schooling, foreign language instruction (essentially English) has long been the mainstay of a subliminal multicultural education in Japan. Since the 1990s, and in particular in the last decade, developing a new generation of Japanese with English speaking abilities has been seen as the major means of accomplishing internationalization.

With the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English, which has become a common international language, in order for living in the 21st century. This has become an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation. (Japanese Ministry of Education, 2003)

In particular, English textbook lessons offer introductions (albeit superficial) to important transcultural topics such as racial discrimination (Martin Luther King Jr.); cultural assimilation and endangered languages (Welsh); and cross-cultural communication ("Hello" in various foreign languages). But Japan lags behind other nations in the study of global citizenship and social justice issues.

One of the most significant efforts to internationalize a generation of Japanese students, the JET program is a noteworthy example of “importing diversity” (McConnell, 2000). Since its inception in 1987, thousands of foreigners have been introducing English language and foreign cultures to junior high and high school students throughout Japan. In the past decade, well over 5000 foreign college graduates per year have taken part in the JET program to enhance international education and the exchange of ideas (Japanese Ministry of Education, 2006a).

Another significant and far-reaching (but controversial) internationalization effort is exemplified in the recent addition of English to the elementary school curriculum (Imoto & Horiguchi, 2009). Moreover, the government has launched the most ambitious English as a foreign language (EFL) program in the history of modern schooling in Japan—“All in English” immersion is mandated from 2013 with English instruction from elementary school through high school and beyond. At present, nearly all elementary school children and more than half kindergarten and preschool children receive some form of EFL (Japanese Ministry of Education, 2006b). Moreover, many children attend extra EFL classes in international preschools, language schools, private classes and so on. But how effective is all this? Most preschool and elementary school lessons are haphazard and not part of a well-thought out curriculum. This is contrary to most curricula in Japan. The results are mixed. Teachers are at a loss as to what methods to use. Furthermore, they lack the confidence and experience to conduct lessons in English. There is a great deal of apprehension among teachers at the elementary school level these days. Innovative solutions and transcultural thinking may lie outside of formal schooling.

Non-Formal Transcultural Education

Children’s television programming provides an interesting window into the world of multicultural Japan. The Japan Broadcasting Company’s (NHK) “Eigo-de Asobo” (Let’s Play in English) started in 1990 while “Nihongo-de Asobo” (Let’s Play in Japanese) began in 2003. Koni-chan (aka KONISHIKI), a former sumo wrestler from Hawaii, hosts *Nihongo-de Asobo*. KONISHIKI integrates Hawaiian songs, culture and style into this educational show, airing daily with *Eigo-de Asobo*. In addition, the program has a regular

feature of various Japanese dialects, ranging from *Okinawa-ben* to *Hokkaido-ben*. There is hardly a preschooler in Japan not familiar with these popular programs.

Many other popular TV programs include hosts who are either foreigners or young people of mixed race. My own daughter has appeared on Japanese television. Her *haafu* or *double* status is an asset in Japan where there is still *gaijin fever*. In Canada, I doubt Marisa would be as popular. Her modeling career would likely come to an abrupt halt. In Canada, about one quarter of all children are mixed. Marisa is just like the other children, but in Japan she is special. However, being labeled special has its drawbacks.

In 2003, when we first moved to Saitama, my eldest son, James was teased by other children at the *Christian* kindergarten he attended. They called him *eigo-jin* (English person). My wife responded by saying, “Don’t call him that! It isn’t nice.” Surprisingly, the reaction of mothers was to ignore their children’s behaviour. When my wife complained to the principal he suggested the ‘problem’ was with our son... “He needs to try harder to fit in”. Herein lies a major problem with Japanese society — assimilation is the status quo.

Discussion: Critiques of a Multicultural Japan

Is a truly multicultural Japan a pipe dream as some suggest (Burgess, 2007)? There is evidence to support this notion. In the wake of 9/11, there has been an increase in anti-immigration rhetoric. Japan has adopted tougher immigration controls. Finger printing is used as a means to keep track of all foreigners entering Japan. Thus, while the number of foreigners residing in Japan continues to increase (in particular, Chinese), this trend has slowed considerably in recent years. In fact, after a peak in 2005 there was a dramatic dip in the number of foreign students coming to Japan, largely as a result of tougher immigration laws. It would appear that increasingly Chinese students are choosing to study elsewhere now.

Let’s examine the criteria for a multicultural Japan more closely. According to Burgess (2007) the critical questions are as follows:

- 1) Does the general population support “multicultural Japan”?
- 2) What multicultural policies have been adopted?
- 3) Are there large numbers of immigrants and are they transforming Japanese society?

In general, Japanese society seems naïve and ignorant of (or at least ambivalent towards) growing signs of multiculturalism in their midst. In a national survey of public attitudes, in 2003 nearly a third of all respondents were opposed to actively promoting tourism because of perceived dangers of admitting foreign criminals (Willis & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2008, p. 310). It is easier for most newcomers from Korea or China to assimilate into the mainstream culture rather, as the saying goes, “the nail that sticks out gets pounded down.” According to a comprehensive study of international marriages of migrants in Yamagata, children were generally growing up monolingual and monocultural. Many of these individuals fully assimilated into the Japanese mainstream within a generation (Burgess, 2003). So, while transcultural hybridity might be celebrated in urban areas like Tokyo or accepted in suburban areas like Saitama, cultural assimilation could still be the norm in rural areas.

As for the adoption of multicultural policies, the national government has traditionally steadfastly opposed any move towards a multicultural policy. Dual citizenship is not officially recognized and there are few refugees accepted. Despite growing numbers of immigrants, there is little government support for ethnic minorities. For example, there isn't any provision for accommodating the thousands of students in the public education system for which Japanese is a second language. In the wake of the global recession an astounding number of Nikkei Japanese-Brazilians are dropping out of school (Ehara, 2010; Kamioka, 2010). Moreover, while the government has lofty aims to “develop Japanese with English speaking abilities” (Japanese Ministry of Education, 2003), proposals for adopting English as an official second language have met with stiff opposition. There are no national policies to deal with the language challenges facing ethnic minorities. Local governments are attempting to provide some support however. Local community groups and volunteers have also tried to help with language classes and newsletters in a variety of languages. International festivals are held to help raise public awareness but these are superficial gestures. Korean residents have taken it upon themselves to start their own schools. Brazilians and others are less organized. Nevertheless, many ethnic schools remain unaccredited. So, graduates have difficulties entering Japanese universities. While local governments are making efforts to assist new immigrants, there is no national policy to

support immigrants. But this could change in the near future.

While Japan remains one of the least diverse industrialized nations with ethnic and national minorities comprising 3 percent of the total population, monumental change is imminent. A massive influx of foreigners in the coming years will be necessary to meet the needs of a rapidly aging population. Just maintaining the size of the working population will require 600,000 immigrants a year. In this scenario, immigrants will comprise more than 30 percent of the Japanese population by 2050. (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2004, pp. 51–57)

The sort of massive increase in immigration alluded to by Murphy-Shigematsu and recommended by the UN (2000) to deal with the harsh demographic realities facing Japan seems highly improbable. Furthermore, in these times of economic uncertainty there is little public support for these policies.

One cannot do justice to multicultural education in Japan without mentioning the systemic discrimination and pervasive racism leveled against other ethnic minorities (Lee, Murphy-Shigematsu, & Befu, 2006). In particular, people of Korean and Chinese descent, comprising about two thirds of all foreigners, while strongly encouraged to assimilate are never fully accepted. Many change their names to Japanese—giving up their heritage language and culture all together. Despite being fluent in Japanese, they are still treated as foreigners. Even Japanese returnees experience hardships as they are considered not “pure” Japanese anymore.

Japan ranks last among OECD nations for racial and gender equality (OECD, 2009). Sadly, attitudes of racial intolerance are shared by the general public and prominent public figures. Not long ago, Aso Taro, former Prime Minister described Japan as “one nation, one language, one culture and one race” (Daily Yomiuri, 2005). His words shocked the foreign population and made headline news outside Japan but barely received any attention from the Japanese public and mainstream media. Japan may be the only developed country where racial discrimination is not illegal. Yet, some scholars maintain that Japan is at the crossroads of becoming a multi-ethnic society (Willis & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2008; Yamanaka, 2002). I remain skeptical but optimistic about this prospect, as there is a new political landscape.

A Promising Transcultural Future for Japan—It's up to you!

In late August 2009, for the first time in 60 years, the Japanese voted for a change in the status quo LDP government. A few weeks later, in his first address to the UN, Prime Minister Hatoyama showed encouraging signs of racial tolerance and a deep understanding of global citizenship. In fact, Hatoyama used the term *multicultural Japan* to describe his vision of a new Japanese society. Perhaps his experience studying at higher education institutions in the US has broadened his perspectives. Furthermore, in Hatoyama's first policy speech to the Diet he stated... "[T]he politics of fraternity that I am promoting aims to create a society in which everyone can play a role without discrimination or prejudice; this will mean promoting gender equality in all aspects of life, including employment and child-rearing. It also seeks to promote cultural diversity to enable everyone to live with dignity, such as by respecting the history and culture of the Ainu people, who are indigenous to Japan." He ended his speech by saying "Let us together create a new Japan" (Japan Times, 2009).

However, in typical Japanese political fashion, a scandal rocked this new progressive government and Hatoyama resigned. The present government seems incapable of making any significant inroads in creating a multicultural society. Thus, inevitably the future of developing a multicultural Japan may lie in grass roots movements rather than the ever-changing political arena. Young people, NPOs, NGOs, community groups and an ever increasing number of vocal transcultural children like my own will likely be the ones to instigate meaningful changes (see Chan, 2008). But as was the case in Canada, it will take a generation or more before these changes are absorbed into the psyche of the populace. Moreover, with the ageing population any radical changes in immigration policy will likely be too little—too late to compensate for the declining birthrate and shrinking labour pool. Thus, a "smaller Japan" might be a foregone conclusion. Nevertheless, it is my sincere hope, for the sake of my children and grandchildren; the future Japan will be a smaller but more inclusive transcultural and diverse society.

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